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THE ADULTERATION OF INTELLIGENCE.

THE newspaper press, like less abstract personages of power apparently unlimited and frequently ill-regulated, is accustomed to assume that it "can do no wrong." Yet, so shrewd an observer as Mr. James Mill said, at a time when the character of newspapers by no means so strongly warranted the remark: "There is scarcely a right for the violation of which, scarcely an operation of government for the disturbance of which, the press may not be employed as an instrument. The offenses capable of being committed by the press are, indeed, nearly coëxtensive with the whole field of delinquency." The writer adds: "There can be no doubt that the press is an instrument peculiarly adapted for the commission of injuries against reputation and for effecting disturbance of the operations of government." To this it may now be added that the press is capable of disregarding material rights, of embarrassing legitimate financial operations, of promoting monopolies, of maintaining corporate usurpations, of provoking the violation of vested interests. Its responsibility to the whole body politic may be assumed, since it is recognized by every newspaper with constant protestations of high moral purpose. Its pretense is (if it be a pretense) that it is seeking rather the good of the whole people than the emolument of its own proprietors. Those who reiterate these claims, it is true, have seldom given any evidence of peculiar qualification, moral or intellectual, for the work so generously, if not so gratuitously, assumed; but they are usually taken at their word, at least by that portion of their readers which it is specially desired to affect. In this respect the public acts with its usual inconsistency. Its avowed position toward the press is one of indolent distrust; but men will believe anything which they wish to believe, and even what they do not wish to believe, acting

instantly upon rumor, as if it were confirmed by ample demonstration.

It would be simply impossible for newspapers to exercise anything like the influence which they unquestionably exert, if readers were in the habit of thinking accurately and of carefully weighing possibilities. The public journals partly exist upon the indifference, the indolence, and the overweening confidence of their patrons, who, having first paid for information, forget the rule of *caveat emptor*, and receive it as if it were beyond dispute. We must admit, as some extenuation of this folly, that if the public deserved a more trustworthy source of information, it is utterly without the means of securing it. The newspaper may not be always the best guide, but often it is the only one. It may well happen that while millions may be interested in the accuracy of intelligence, with our present machinery for its transmission and publication, only a few may be able to secure it, while, for their own purposes, they may suppress the true or suggest the opposite. It is needless to point out how nefariously exclusive intelligence may be employed, or what a power its possession may be, or how disastrously to the rights of others facts may be garbled and falsehoods invented. The enormous and yet delicately sensitive operations of the Stock Exchange offer the strongest illustration of the mischievous effects of exclusive or untrustworthy intelligence, because its operations, partaking of the nature of a game of chance, are conducted with peculiar rapidity, and leave little or no time for the correction of error. Moreover, values there being in many instances fictitious, and bargain and sale frequently having no solid basis of property, there may be insolvency without assets and little protection against tort, except the moral one, which is principally limited to the preservation of a seat in the Brokers' Board and the opportunity for speedy recuperation. How far the sales at the Board are *bona fide* in comparison with those outside, which notoriously are not so, we shall not pause to inquire. The whole business of buying and selling stocks is of such a character that the legal maxim, *qui facit per alium facit per se*, is too often ignored. If an important speculator desires work done of a dubious nature, there are agents to be secured all around him, without characters to lose or seats to be forfeited. In all this tangled and hazardous business it must be evident that the strongest or, at least, the safest position is that occupied by the

freebooter of the market. He cares for no reputation except that of audacious success. While failing himself to penetrate the privileged interior of the Board, he may be represented by one holding toward him a *quasi* partnership relation. Thus, being under none of the wholesome restraints provided by such honor and integrity as the Board may itself provide, he is at liberty to carry on his operations in such manner and in such quarters as he may deem most profitable to himself and most damaging to his enemies. He has at his service the whole intricate machinery of the market, without being amenable to its code or to its unwritten laws. If he has no conscience to torment him, no lingering regard for veracity to make him uneasy, no care for the ruin he may wreak, or the wretchedness he may occasion; admitting him to be selfish, greedy, and unscrupulous, utterly free from the restraining influence of self-respect, it requires no other evidence to prove that though he may be feared, he is not to be trusted, and that he is the last to whom extraordinary power is to be wisely confided.

The safety of the public from the tyranny of great corporations is in the number of corporators and in their individual responsibility; but this safety, by a singular paradox, diminishes as the number of corporators grows less, and disappears altogether when the corporation, or a majority of its stock, is under the control of an individual. There can be no fuller opportunity for absolute despotism over all others interested than that which is thus afforded. The rights of original investors are nothing to the man who comes into possession of fifty-one per cent. of the stock, while he may refuse with impunity to acknowledge the convenience or, as often happens, the safety of the public, reigning supreme, the king of the railway, of the telegraph, of the newspaper! Contemptuously disregarding every equitable feature of the situation, he may placidly indulge in dreams of yet more enormous wealth or less limited power. Such tyrants are neither petty nor insignificant.

There is an old distich which it was once the fashion to place at the heads of newspapers:

“Here shall the press the people’s rights maintain,
Unawed by influence and unbribed by gain.”

There may have been numerous examples of this more than Spartan virtue in times which are regarded as good, chiefly

because they are old. In these days of degeneracy, the newspaper is not necessarily a paragon of honesty, of veracity, or even of that simple sincerity which may mean well enough while making great mistakes. Journalists, it is true, are seldom given to self-depreciation. Modesty is not a characteristic of the leaded columns, and one may sometimes observe there a self-complacency a little comical. The air of indomitable and Rhadamanthine equity is no more wanting than the frequent intimation of omniscience. The everlasting "we" may lend to the crudest conclusion the dignity of a royal proclamation. The intention of impressing the public is always obtrusive, and often the public is impressed. Being in too much of a hurry, it hires a three-penny oracle. It may receive the truth or be put off with "words deceiving," for such is the chance of all who depend upon oracles.

The newspaper may either be following just behind advancing public opinion, or it may be endeavoring to create such opinion, but in either case its utterance is of no more value because it is printed than would be the oral opinion of the person who was employed at so much a column to put it in shape. *Prima facie* there can be no claim to judicial impartiality. A newspaper may be influenced by a variety of motives. It may aim, by the creation of a factitious excitement, to secure a sale large enough to be profitable, or at least to attract advertisers. It may be the instrument, literally bought and paid for, of a political party. It may be the mouth-piece of a financial clique, or of one financial adventurer. It may be used to gratify the personal resentment of its managers. It may lend itself, for a consideration, to feed the grudges of those rich enough to subsidize it. It may be arrogant to the weak and compliant to the strong.

Because a man has become the owner of a newspaper, it does not follow that he is fit to manage it, unless management is considered from the lowest and most material point of view. Strictly speaking, newspaper publication is a species of manufacture. Talk of patriotism, of love of the people, of devotion to justice, of honest politics, may really mean business, as the phrase is, and have no loftier purpose than that of making money. There may have been a time when the leading American newspapers were all of them free from this debasing passion for financial success; some of them may be so still. There have been, perhaps there may still be, editors like Mr. Greeley, quite careless

of acquiring wealth. There have been editors like Mr. Leggett, who, nearly fifty years ago, when left for a time in charge of "The Evening Post," nearly ruined it by his sturdy defiance of the money-changers of Wall street. But it cannot be denied that too many newspapers, particularly those printed near the great centers of business, are now no more than the instruments of the self-seeking, the ambitious, the lovers of pelf, and the lovers of power. Each of these is now more than ever the representative of an individual, meaning "I" always when it says "we." He uses his staff of writers as a general uses his mercenaries, or a great railway contractor his "navvies." He recognizes no right of independent thought in those who are employed by him. He generally acquires, especially as he grows richer, a contempt for the intellectual ability of his servants, and fancies that he can anywhere and at any time purchase it. He manages the internal affairs of his office as a pedagogue manages a district school. He grows daily more and more despotic as he grows richer and richer. He may at last be able to defy the public, partly because the public is not his best patron, and partly because it has fallen into a lazy habit of believing without any real faith, and has delegated to one who thinks only of himself its own liberty of thinking. And all this time this mock Jupiter, who is credited with the possession of real thunderbolts, may be ignorant and selfish, ill-bred and heartless, vain to silliness, and absolutely unscrupulous. The lamentable spectacle which such a man, whatever his material success, would present to the eyes of thinkers, of scholars, and of gentlemen, may be only the figment of a needless apprehension, and if so let us pray Providence that it may always be so.

Yet in this, as in all other human affairs, we must make allowance for the infirmities of human nature. To be sure, no New York editor writes over the door of his den, *Primum pecunia quærenda; virtus post nummos*; and nobody would believe him if he did. They would say that the good, honest man was only joking. There are legends, not numerous, but fairly authenticated, of editors who have exhibited a miraculous integrity and bid Satan get behind them. For this they have been rewarded, some fifty and some a hundred fold. Virtuous indignation may sometimes prove a good investment, bringing excellent interest in the public confidence and a proportionate increase of circulation. The Duke of Newcastle once gave to Mr. Gifford,

the editor of "The London Standard," the sum of £1200 as a reward for a single article against Roman Catholic Emancipation. The wily editor knew too much to appropriate this money personally; he gave it to some charity, but the facts being made public were worth a much larger sum to "The Standard." Grant, the historian of the London press, says that to his certain knowledge, Moran, the sub-editor of "The Globe," during the railway mania, in 1845, received a considerable number of allotments of shares, which he sold at a large premium. During the same period of mad speculation, "The London Times" fairly and squarely denounced it, and its weekly receipts for advertising fell off from £6687 to £2320. Still, nobody can suppose that "The Times" lost anything. Such stories are very impressive in print.

But turning from these pleasant examples of British virtue, how are we situated at home? We are not responsible for the truth of statements which are in the mouths of everybody, and really seem to be denied by nobody. There are certain newspapers which, it is asserted, are owned or controlled by Mr. Jay Gould. Who he is it is unnecessary for us to state. He is pretty well known, and mankind is not ignorant of his peculiar merits. It may be admitted that Mr. Gould might have obtained control of the Western Associated Press; might have pooled the journals which he owns or controls here, members of the Associated Press with the Western Association; might have succeeded in amalgamating the Associated Press and the Western Union Company. What Mr. Gould is not able to effect to-day he may accomplish to-morrow, for millions of money are a mighty power. Now, in his recent operations, we suppose that nobody will pretend that his purpose was to secure to the public the cheap and accurate dissemination of intelligence. It is conjectured that one of his desires was to benefit certain Western newspapers which he is said to own or control. He cared nothing for the interests of a portion of the New York, of the New England, the Philadelphia, or the Baltimore press; for when it was proposed to admit these to the Associated Press, the proposition was voted down by newspapers supposed to be owned or controlled by him. Men like Mr. Gould do not devise huge schemes like these for the sake of keeping the public well-informed. This eminent money-maker, whatever may be his skill, shrewdness, or valor in conducting a stock-jobbing campaign, is not credited with a heart

swollen with love for his fellow-creatures, or with spending his days in devising plans for the benefit of mankind. If he purchases newspapers, it is that he may use them in his business. If he contrives practically to monopolize the ocean cable, it is not that he may bring two continents together in love and amity, but that he may get good dividends and extend profitably his operations to the financial centers of the Old World. If he seeks to make the conveniences and the opportunities of the Associated Press his own, it is that he may cause newspapers to publish something or suppress something which it may be for his interest to have published or suppressed. If he really owns the newspapers which he is credited with owning—and there is nothing absolutely improbable in the story—it is idle to talk of the editorial responsibility of the persons nominally occupying the editorial stools in Mr. Jay Gould's printing-houses. In each instance, Mr. Gould himself is that august autocrat, the editor-in-chief.

Let us suppose, further, that there exists a Jay Gould cable monopoly; that this gentleman and his associates are in a position to establish rates, to suppress intelligence, to color that which may not be suppressed, and generally to use the cable, not for the public benefit, but for their own private emolument. Such being the circumstances, we will suppose that other capitalists, dissatisfied with this state of affairs, have projected another cable, of which Mr. Gould will not have control, and which will have the natural effect of competition in reducing rates. These premises being granted, it follows, as probable, that if Mr. Gould does really own or control certain newspapers, these journals will be the first to denounce the new enterprise as a stock-jobbing speculation. Something like this has really occurred. The newspapers which Mr. Gould is supposed to own or control are the very newspapers which have made haste to stigmatize the promoters of the new cable, as engaged in a foolish speculation which is sure to fail. The scheme is denounced as illusory, insincere, rash, and imprudent to the last degree. Now, the disapproval which is thus expressed of the enterprise is not one which any newspaper would be likely, apart from outside influences, to entertain. A reduction of rates would materially benefit all newspapers wishing to use the ocean telegraph for the legitimate purpose of obtaining general intelligence. There was no reason why the whole press of New York should not have

rejoiced exceedingly at the prospect of securing foreign dispatches at lower rates. That, to some of these newspapers, the plan should have appeared worthy only of opposition and obstructive criticism, was, to say the least of it, a most suspicious circumstance.

The simultaneous control of the telegraph, of long lines of railway, and of leading newspapers, by a few men acting in a corporate capacity, or by one man employing the advantages of a corporation, puts the whole public, so far as intelligence is concerned, at the mercy of unlimited power. The only question remaining is, what is intelligence, early and accurate, worth? The eagerness of mere money-makers to grasp a monopoly of the transmission of intelligence, proves that it is worth a great deal. That cannot be without inordinate advantages which such men are so anxious to possess. A broad generalization presents the matter as sufficiently as could the minutest and most varied particulars. The power to vitiate information, to misrepresent facts, to misreport money and other markets, as well as the probabilities of production, to overestimate or underestimate crops, or losses by fire or by railway casualties, in the chances of war or peace, or pending legislation, or the intentions of the treasury, is a power to control financial and commercial operations for private and personal benefit. If the lord of the lines above us or under our feet desires to inflate values, his are the means always at hand of doing so. If, on the other hand, it is for his interest to depress prices, his facilities are the same. He competes with all who are engaged in trade of any kind, in stock selling or buying, in production, in fetching and carrying, as the dexterous gambler, manipulating marked cards, competes with an honest or ignorant adversary. He adds to the advantages of an absolutely unlimited capital something like prescience, if not omniscience. He wagers upon a certainty. He may not only determine what shall be sent over the wires, or the form in which it shall be given to the public, but he may direct that it shall not be given to the public at all. He may even mislead the managers of newspapers not his own, who desire to tell the truth and all the truth, and thus make them the innocent agents of fraud. All this may vastly increase his personal fortune, but it is an increase which brings no compensating public benefit. On the contrary, it may work enormous injury, by enabling the modern Cæsus to fix prices, to increase

the costs of carriage, to monopolize markets, and to limit supply. It is precisely this which has led many commercial men to the conclusion that it would be better for the Government of the United States to purchase and officially manage the telegraphic lines of the whole country, rather than leave them in the hands of one man whose name (according to the opinion of the Board of Trade and Transportation) has "become a synonym for unscrupulousness and rapacity." These are not our words, but they have been deliberately used in the presence of a respectable mercantile body without protest or dispute of their accuracy. They indicate, at least, the fears of intelligent men of business.

In considering the question of the newspaper, it is necessary to look as intelligently as possible into the probable future. Notwithstanding our remarkable expansion, the real destiny, the ultimate historical experience of the United States, the fortunes of this continent to be covered in the next ages by an almost innumerable population, must be matters, to a considerable extent, of speculation. Like no previous nation, we have begun with an unreserved recognition of the democratic element, and with a suffrage well-nigh universal. But, while democracy implies absolute personal equality, and has been accurately defined as the supremacy of man over his accidents, we have not escaped the action of well-established natural laws. Wealth, in spite of all constitutional and legislative precautions, implies power, so long as it is protected by law, while, by its influence upon legislation, it also possesses the capacity for self-protection, as well as for self-aggrandizement. Through its control of the material necessities of the whole body-politic, and its ability to promote or restrain production, it may for a time exercise dominant sway, and have and hold those who are not wealthy at its mercy. But the aggregate amount of the real wealth of any nation being limited by its production, it follows that its absorption by a few must leave the great majority under the weight of comparative poverty. This always has awakened and always will awaken the most dangerous passions of our common nature—envy, class-hatred, covetousness. But it will do more, and, perhaps, worse than this. It will seduce the masses into the maze of irregular speculation, and leave the many, who have here the power of legislation, with no better guides than instincts, which may not be logical and may be dangerously sophistical. Possibly, it is absurd for a poor man to ask angrily why he is poor, even to

want, while his neighbor is rich, even to repletion; but he will sometimes ask the inconvenient question all the same. Finally, after asking, until he has become impatient, without receiving any satisfactory answer, the *ultima ratio* may vaguely present itself to his bewildered mind. It will not help matters much to tell him that he is a thief, a fool, and a rascal, as some newspapers do. Already, there are alarming signs of the tendency of the many to exercise the power which they undoubtedly possess. We gain nothing by shutting our eyes to inevitable tendencies, to the rapid, though still clumsy organization of the laboring classes. A riot will not always be their ready, but irrational resource. They will find out some time the fallacy of strikes, or they will conduct them after a surer and more effective fashion. Thus far it has been one of the worst features of the adulteration of intelligence that newspapers owned or controlled by capitalists almost invariably have taken the side of the employer against the employed. It would be remarkable if capital were always in the right and labor always in the wrong. Undoubtedly there are great faults and errors upon both sides, but, in a contest of the weak against the strong, there should be large and liberal allowance made for even the honest ignorance of the former, for blind zeal and mistaken passion. We gain nothing by telling a great body of working-men that they are stupid and wicked, or by sneering at them as ridiculously incapable of effecting their purposes. To misreport studiously the movements of the operative classes is merely to provoke them to the exercise of physical force which they do understand, and which in this republic is particularly to be dreaded. The newspapers which doggedly misrepresent the situation are losing large opportunities of doing a great deal of good. Unless sold and delivered, brains, presses, types, and all, to this millionaire or the other, they might act as umpires in this great dispute, and perhaps save the parties engaged in it from follies which must end, if persisted in, most disastrously. The responsibilities of the American newspaper, and particularly those of leading journals, are great. It may be well to have a giant's strength, but it may be shameful to use it like a giant. With ample capital, with such culture and intellectual ability as may drift into the offices, with such brains as can be purchased, with innumerable readers who are willing, and frequently too willing, to be convinced, what might not "the great dailies," as they are sometimes called,

do to avert the storm which is impending? Why should they be only money-making enterprises, thus naturally lapsing to the money-making side? Why should they be, on the part of the proprietors, only opportunities of vulgar ostentation? Provocative merely of foolish wonder at their low success, real or apparent? The supple agents of those who are richer than they are or can hope to be? Surely the most prosperous of modern editors might, in some unguarded moment of honest self-communing, remember how Mr. Garrison printed the first shabby sheets of "The Liberator" in a Boston garret; or how Mr. Greeley, as far as possible from being a Gorgius Midas, poor, unknown, and with no capital except his own dauntless determination, struggled to establish a newspaper which should be the friend of the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.

The consequences of a journalism devoted mainly to the conservation of corporate and financial power are not confined to the gambling experiments of misinformation. The history of newspapers abundantly demonstrates that the dangerous and dissatisfied classes—dangerous we mean to vested rights and dissatisfied with existing social relations—have never found any difficulty in securing organs of their own. This, cheap printing now renders still less difficult. Any period of political excitement is sure to produce a brood of irresponsible sheets, badly edited and badly printed it is true, but still exercising an influence which may be most undesirable over the thoughts and actions of their readers. The despot may temporarily protect himself from such enemies by rigid censorship, but there can be no censorship of the press in a democracy. In France, in 1789, began that remarkable increase in the number of Parisian newspapers which did so much to forward the first French revolution. Marat sent forth *L'Ami du Peuple*; Mirabeau his *Courier de Provence*; Barère his *Journal des Débats*; Hébert his *Père Duchesne*, while Camille Desmoulins rushed through his short but brilliant career. The revolution which led to the establishment of the Second Empire was equally prolific of cheap newspapers which, after effecting no little mischief, disappeared with the circumstances which called them into existence. In England, in spite of occasional periods of rigid and vigorous war by the Government upon the liberties of the press, the demagogue has always found it a ready and useful instrument. It was the medium through

which the letters of the unprincipled Junius, that best of good haters, were given to the public. It has employed scores of dishonest and troublesome writers once notorious enough but now forgotten. Of how much value the voluminous writings of William Cobbett were to the world we need not stop to inquire, but of their great number and strong contemporary influence there can be no question. The contributions of this industrious man to periodical literature, with his other works, fill one hundred and six volumes. It may do no harm to ask ourselves, particularly at this time, what might be the disastrous power of such a writer in the United States,—of a man of indomitable will, of vigorous intellect, at once combative and careless of the weapons which he used, devoted to what are called the rights of the people, with a genius for making the poor dissatisfied and quarrelsome. A journalist thus endowed, master of a forcible style and of peculiar powers of sophistry, would make sharp and short work of the carpet-knights of the newspapers, and might soon create a school of journalism which would be astonishing and inconvenient not only to presidents and secretaries and members of congress, but to all dilettante votaries of the press. Cheap publications of the class which we have indicated might be frequently wrong and not seldom actually wicked, but they would only be copying, after their light, an example set them in much more pretentious quarters. But against such a plague of lice and of fleas we may well pray to be delivered. Unless, however, those who own or control newspapers take heed in time, unless they remember that money and political power and the opportunities of politicians (not statesmen) are not the loftiest objects of human energy, just so surely as cause follows effect will the day of an actually popular journalism come. We are going on madly in many things, but in nothing are we madder than in fancying that the giant democracy, which thus far has been kept under tolerable restraint, can always be made to believe what capitalists and the editorial agents of capitalists wish them to believe. The adulteration of intelligence may work in a quite unlooked-for way; the misstatement of social problems may end in explosions painful to apprehend; and a people left in ignorance may prove quite beyond the management even of the wisdom which, for a considerable portion of the year, irradiates the city of Washington.